

“There’s no space for peace when perfectionism is a priority.”

-Christian Bosse

In an increasingly competitive, yet interconnected world, it can be easy to fall prey to perfectionist tendencies, comparing ourselves to the shiny, curated images on social media. Berating ourselves where we fall short, whether for not being skinny enough, smart enough, rich enough, good enough. Instead of feeling the need to “keep up with the Joneses” in our neighborhood, suddenly we have to live up to the glamorous social media lives of acquaintances halfway across the country. But if the death of influencer Gabby Petito is any indication, posts on social media are often incomplete, if not total lies. The problem is the cultural narrative that glorifies perfectionism and suggests it is the path to success. But there is a difference between trying to be our best and trying to be the best.

And when perfectionism does lead to success, at what cost? Take Steve Jobs, for example. He is hailed as a brilliant entrepreneur and inventor, having co-founded Apple and revolutionized the personal computer. But his obsession with perfection, particularly with regard to perfect design came at great personal cost. Though he lived in a sprawling mansion, he debated what furniture to buy for eight years, sacrificing the comfort of living room furniture on the altar of perfectionism. His perfectionism robbed him of his happiness and even his health. At times it even interfered with his professional success, causing him to be ousted from Apple, albeit temporarily.

The cultural narrative is wrong, perfectionism doesn’t guarantee success, far from it. A focus on perfection stifles creativity and efficiency, often leading to procrastination out of fear of failure. Perfectionism is often mistaken as striving for excellence, but there is an important distinction between striving to do your best and striving to be the best. Perfectionists equate their self worth with their performance, such that any failure means they are a failure.

At its root, perfectionism is an attempt to shield us from shame. When we feel worthless and ashamed of who we are, we may put on a mask of being perfect and having it all together. By setting goals that are impossibly high, we’ll be beyond reproach and finally feel worthy. But perfectionism is a downward spiral. We set out to prove our self-worth by trying to meet unrealistic standards. When we fail to attain these unrealistic goals, we feel worthless and empty.

Signs and Symptoms of Perfectionism

- 1) Procrastination
- 2) Indecisiveness /state of freeze
- 3) Fear of failure, of not being good enough
- 4) Impossibly high expectations of self or others
- 5) Obsessive/ruminating thoughts

- 6) Inability to recognize your own accomplishments
- 7) Frequently comparing yourself to others

Perfectionist tendencies are often part of a lifelong pattern of coping. They may have been learned from observing our parents or important role models in our lives. Or they may have been useful coping mechanisms in childhood that have become maladaptive over time and changed circumstances. Self-critical perfectionism is often associated with depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

Self-Compassion is the Antidote

If perfectionism is a poison, self-compassion is the antidote. This can take many forms from self-care in the form of a cup of tea to regular exercise and daily meditation. As human beings, making mistakes is inevitable. But what's most important is how we treat ourselves when we falter. Being kind to ourselves in the face of a mistake or failure, whether perceived or imagined, increases our ability to bounce back and learn from our mistakes, rather than drowning in self-criticism and doubt.

Practicing Self-Compassion

If you struggle with a harsh inner critic, the first step towards being kinder to yourself is noticing that negative inner dialogue. Sometimes these harsh thoughts can be so ingrained and automatic, we become unaware of them. But like a computer virus, they wreak havoc behind the scenes. Once you've become aware of the pattern of your negative thoughts, you can begin to replace them with more positive self-talk. For example, if you don't do as well as you'd like on an exam or performance review, rather than berate yourself, you might note the difficulty of the exam or the work environment and focus on your strengths and whether or not they are being utilized by your field of study or workplace.

An evidence-based practice that has been proven to cultivate more self-compassion and reduce reactivity and fear is the loving kindness meditation. Although there are a number of ways to practice loving-kindness meditation, one method involves the simple practice of inhaling loving kindness and exhaling fear. Done regularly, preferably daily, this meditation can help form new ways of responding to mistakes and perceived failures, rather than reacting in self-critical ways.

If you've tried to change negative patterns of thinking unsuccessfully on your own and need help, please reach out to schedule a free consultation to see if we are a good fit to work together.